United Nations A/54/PV.67

General Assembly
Fifty-fourth session

Official Records

67th plenary meeting
Tuesday, 30 November 1999, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Gurirab . . . . . (Namibia)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Ikouebe (Congo), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 43 (*continued*)

The situation in the Middle East

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/54/457, A/54/495)

Draft resolutions (A/54/L.40, A/54/L.41)

Mr. Lancry (Israel): As we approach the end of the twentieth century, it can be said that the Arab-Israeli conflict is finally drawing to a close. With our largest neighbour, the Republic of Egypt, Israel has enjoyed peaceful relations since the ground-breaking Peace Treaty between our two States, reached in 1979. We have also concluded a Treaty of Peace with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and recently celebrated its fifth anniversary. As I stated here yesterday, we have been steadily moving forward in our negotiations with the Palestinians, and hope to achieve an agreement on permanent status within a year, an agreement that is to put an end to the conflict between us.

The Middle East is witnessing an era of unprecedented diplomatic momentum. The positive atmosphere was reinforced recently by the new diplomatic ties established between Israel and Mauritania. We have, moreover, been expanding our economic and other ties with States in the region from the Maghreb to the Nile and up to the Gulf.

Now, in order to complete this ever widening circle of peace, we must also achieve progress with our northern neighbours, Syria and Lebanon, each of which we equally hope to join in a peace agreement. However, we must also reiterate that as a democratic State, where parliamentary debate is an essential component of the decision-making process on issues of national security, Israel simply cannot accept a precondition for beginning the talks. This is especially true when it is a precondition that demands a prior acceptance of the final outcome in accordance with the views of only one party.

We believe that the history of Middle East peacemaking has shown that the forum best suited for presenting one's views is the negotiating room. Negotiations are the basic bridge to peace. I therefore reiterate the call made here by our Foreign Minister, His Excellency Mr. David Levy, in his address to the General Assembly on 29 September 1999, "to cease hesitating. It is time to talk" (*A/54/PV.16, p. 14*).

In these negotiations, Syria will find an Israeli partner willing to make the difficult decisions necessary to arrive together at a peace of the brave, a peace with honour. We envision this peace as containing a depth of territorial compromise commensurate with both the depth of peace and the quality of the security arrangements that we are able to achieve.

99-86611 (E)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original speeches only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

In addition, we wish to see Lebanon too joining the camp of peacemakers. I would like to take this opportunity to restate that Israel never had, nor do we now have, any territorial claims or disputes with Lebanon. Our one and only interest is to guarantee the safety and security of our citizens. The Government of Lebanon has failed in past years to enforce its sovereignty in the southern part of Lebanon. Unfortunately, it has yet to disarm the Hezbollah and to take back the free rein it has granted militants in southern Lebanon who call for Israel's destruction and who target its civilians with rocket attacks.

In the hope of improving this situation, Israel has repeatedly expressed its willingness to implement Security Council resolution 425 (1978) in its entirety, which calls not only for an Israeli withdrawal but also for the return of the effective authority of the Government of Lebanon in the area and for the restoration of international peace and security. It has now been close to two years since we formally extended to Lebanon our invitation to negotiate the implementation of Security Council resolution 425 (1978). Instead, the Government of Lebanon has regrettably chosen to allow the conflict to continue and the human toll to rise. Nevertheless, we call upon the Government of Lebanon to seize the present opportunity to change the situation, to meet us at the negotiating table and to join the tide of peace now emerging in the region.

In the drive towards regional stability, each State has both the power and the responsibility to ensure that its territory does not become a launching ground for terrorist attacks. It should be recalled that the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, contained in resolution 2625 (XXV) of 24 October 1970, makes clear that sovereignty carries a responsibility not to allow terrorist acts to be organized and prepared on one's territory, or to be launched from it.

The policies of Iran, like those of Lebanon, are in direct conflict with that resolution: Iran continues to sponsor and reinforce Hezbollah in Lebanon, and that group openly engages in a campaign against the existence of the State of Israel, backed by Iranian ammunition and Iranian funds. This is symptomatic of the threshold on which we currently stand in the Middle East: a new era of stability and regional cooperation is finally within reach, yet there remain those forces which would spoil consensus and pull us back into a cycle of threats and distrust.

Iran's continuing efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction and its adoption of a policy that does not recognize the right of every State to live in peace and security in the region constitute an alarming example. Iran has already tested a missile with a range of 1,300 kilometres, the Shihab-3, that can strike Israel from launch points within Iranian territory. Even longer range Iranian missiles are known to be under development.

Meanwhile, during the last eight years, Iraq has been under a most intrusive arms control and disarmament regime. Yet, that mechanism did not prevent Iraq from maintaining its clandestine programmes for developing chemical, nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction. Iraq still remains a major threat to international peace and security. Indeed, Iraq directly threatened Israel with annihilation by chemical weapons and actually attacked Israel's civilian population with lethal missiles.

The peoples of the Middle East can become free of the threat of mass destruction, but only when nations first establish a foundation of trust, and the desire — from within the region — to end a state of war and replace the context of threats and terror with the context of peace and reconciliation.

We have witnessed tremendous progress with our Palestinian partners, through a process of direct talks that succeeded as long as it preserved the essential framework and timetable of Israeli-Palestinian agreements. In particular, it was agreed that issues such as Jerusalem would be resolved directly in the permanent status negotiations.

Nevertheless, in light of the draft resolution before us, I believe that it would be appropriate to restate at this time that Jerusalem is the united capital of the State of Israel, under Israeli sovereignty. King David established its standing as the capital of the Jewish nation over three thousand years ago. Since that time, Jerusalem has been at the heart and soul of the Jewish people, playing a central role in Jewish culture, history and religion.

The city, although holy to three major religions, has never been the capital of any other nation and, save for a 19 year period in this century, has never been divided. We are aware that our Palestinian partners do not share our views on this issue, yet we expect that they do share our commitment to a negotiated solution, to which both sides have obligated themselves in all Israeli-Palestinian agreements. With this commitment in mind, and with the

negotiating process already under way, Israel feels that it is inappropriate for the United Nations General Assembly to prejudice, through its resolutions, the outcome of these talks.

Cooperation is the lifeblood of peace, the force that transforms a mere truce into a lasting reality of peace whose benefits flow to all the peoples of the region. In the spirit of this ideal, the multilateral peace process was born at the Madrid Conference as a parallel track to the bilateral talks, aimed at regional problems that transcend boundaries, so as to promote long-term regional development and security in a wide range of areas.

The five working groups established in the framework of the multilateral talks have met a number of times, but unfortunately their activities have been frozen in the past few years, due to irrelevant political considerations. This is the time to resurrect them. Any delay or imposed condition is liable to undermine the peace process and delay the assistance and cooperation so essential for the peoples of the region.

Along with its belief in the importance of multilateral regional cooperation, Israel is also committed to strengthening direct cooperation with the Palestinians and, bilaterally, with its Arab neighbours. I am pleased to report that such efforts have met with significant success.

The Israeli-Palestinian development cooperation programme, which we described at length in our statement on assistance to the Palestinian people, is now a top priority. Palestinian professionals make up the largest group of students in Israel-based training courses, while a growing working relationship has tied Israeli and Palestinian non-governmental organizations, governmental organizations, health clinics and academic institutions.

With our neighbour Jordan we have enjoyed a unique relationship of mutual goodwill and cooperation, from working together in development programmes to stimulating economic growth in our two States. In 1998, over 130 Jordanian professionals participated in professional training courses in Israel, in areas ranging from agriculture, medicine and public health to environmental conservation and community development. In addition, a variety of cooperative ventures have been launched between the two States, including projects on demining the Jordan Valley, agricultural development programmes and wide range of others that are making progress as I speak here today.

Since the signing of the peace treaty in 1979, Egypt and Israel have acquired much experience in the field of agricultural development cooperation, the success of which can be measured by the friendly relations enjoyed with Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture. Egyptian-Israeli collaboration has taken the form of on-site demonstration activities, professional training programmes, short- and long-term consultancies and research and development projects. This has coincided with the Mubarak Plan, the Government of Egypt's far-reaching plan to reclaim desert lands along the Nile for agricultural cultivation. In 1994, trilateral training programme between Denmark, Egypt and Israel was established, enabling thousands of graduates to participate in professional agricultural training courses conducted in Israel and in Egypt.

Peace between leaders must permeate the consciousness of their peoples. Overall perceptions must be changed, and a solid foundation for continued peaceful coexistence must be fashioned. Much to our dismay, however, we have come to witness a very common, yet disturbing, phenomenon. While direct negotiations are being carried out between the parties, a kind of diplomatic assault is being carried out by some of our Arab neighbours in every conceivable international forum. This situation is impacting negatively on our sincere efforts to gradually build confidence between the sides. We believe that all sides should take upon themselves to abide by a code of conduct appropriate for partners in negotiation and reconciliation. History has shown that peace negotiations are successful when they follow a set of established guidelines for peacemaking.

We cannot afford to lose the present opportunity to bring peace to our region. We owe it to our children, at the very least, to try with all our might to seize the potential for peace while it is within reach. From this podium I call on our Arab partners in peacemaking to continue strengthening the coordination between us, without expending our energies in outdated rhetoric. We will accomplish our common goals only if we all speak the same language, the language of peace. All of us gathered here know the language and the new reality it can bring us. We invite you to join us in embracing it.

Mrs. Al-Nadari (Yemen) (*spoke in Arabic*): Once again, as for year after year for more than five decades, this Organization is discussing the question of the Middle East. Many resolutions on the Middle East have not been implemented as a result of Israeli intransigence, based on the logic of power and defiance and its non-response to the will of the international community. Thus, the Middle

East has suffered from a feverish climate: wars, instability and tension. Regrettably, many opportunities for peace have been lost, especially since the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the agreements and understandings of the principle of land for peace. The whole world has been hoping that the peace process will be successful, despite its complexities, and that a lasting, just and comprehensive peace will be achieved. However, this hope has not been realized.

Now, we have a new chance. The parties and the relevant mediators have been trying to revive the peace process on all its tracks. Yet we see Israel, the occupying Power, exercising its expansionist policies by annexing lands, establishing settlements, appropriating water resources, creating hurdles for this peace and intensifying its policies of oppression and terrorism.

It is high time for the international community to force Israel to honour its commitments and respect international resolutions and the Charter of the United Nations, on the basis of which Israel was accepted as a Member of this Organization. Especially since the cold war and the circumstances for duplicitous positions are over, there is no justification for giving Israel special treatment that protects its illegal practices.

The whole world is now awaiting the implementation of the purposes and principles of the Charter, and expects a world of peace, justice and stability. The culture of peace for which this international Organization is calling is based on the values and ways of life of the international community. Peace starts in the minds of people. It is in the minds of people that the foundation for peace must be built. A just peace cannot be built unless the ideas of occupation, imbalances of power, political manoeuvring and the imposition of faits accomplis are relinquished. There must be the necessary political will to implement the resolutions of international legitimacy, to liberate the occupied Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan Heights and southern Lebanon, to force Israel to withdraw unconditionally from these territories and to restore the rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to establish their own independent State on their territory, with Al-Quds al-Sharif as its capital.

Will Israel agree to this? Yemen has lent its support to all efforts aimed at achieving peace and has always supported the Middle East peace process since it began. Like other countries we look forward to seeing an end to pessimism and political frustration; we look forward to the achievement of peace.

We hope that the Middle East will be made a zone free of all weapons of mass destruction. We call on all the parties to continue their work and to redouble their efforts in order to establish such a zone within the framework of international law and in accordance with the principles of justice and fairness. In this way the Middle East and its peoples will be able to enjoy stability, security and peace.

Mr. Krokhmal (Ukraine): For more than half a century, the situation in the Middle East has remained a subject receiving the close attention and deep concern of the United Nations and the international community at large. The continuous international efforts aimed at assisting the peoples of the region to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East have resulted, at different periods, in progress and setbacks, in successes and failures. Today, at the threshold of a new millennium, there is a strong hope that this process is nearing fruition.

Ukraine has always been supportive of the Middle East peace process based on the principles laid down at the Madrid Peace Conference, in the Oslo agreements and in the relevant United Nations resolutions. We are convinced that all the parties to the process, both Arab and Israeli, have no alternative but to overcome their hostility and mistrust, to stop unilateral acts and to complete the implementation of the Madrid peace process formula, which is based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), as well as on the principle of land for peace.

As the Assembly is aware, the Middle East peace process is progressing unevenly. Currently, different tracks of the Arab-Israeli negotiations are at different stages. While we have seen significant progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, the Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian tracks have been stalled for a long time.

Most recently, Ukraine welcomed the signing, on 4 September 1999 in Sharm el-Sheikh, of the Israeli-Palestinian Memorandum that broke the stalemate and uncertainty that had prevailed in the negotiations for more than eight months. The signing of this document reopened the way to talks on the most complex and sensitive issues related to the final status, such as the status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, the problem of Palestinian refugees, border and security arrangements, the sharing of water resources, and so forth.

Similarly, my country was encouraged by the steps that followed the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum. These included the resumption of the permanent status negotiations, the release of 350 Palestinian prisoners, the opening of the southern safe passage route, the understanding on the timetable for the conclusion of the framework agreement and the final settlement agreement, and further Israeli redeployment from parts of the West Bank. We believe that the Oslo summit of 2 November 1999 has also contributed to the revitalization of the peace process.

Ukraine commends the courageous efforts, political will and wisdom of President Arafat and Prime Minister Barak and their determination to pursue the challenging goal of concluding the permanent status negotiations within the agreed timeline. We also pay tribute to the enormous efforts of all international players who over the years have contributed to and continue to support the peace process.

At the same time, we are concerned by continued Israeli settlement activities in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and other Arab territories, despite the numerous resolutions of the General Assembly urging Israel to stop these practices. In this regard, we call on the parties to refrain from any unilateral actions that could prejudge the outcome of the ongoing direct talks and undermine the fragile atmosphere of peace. It is imperative for the parties to strictly follow the letter and the spirit of agreements signed to date and to abide by their commitments and obligations.

My country maintains that the achievement of a comprehensive settlement of the Middle East process will be impossible without bringing the Syrian and Lebanese negotiations back on track. In this regard, we would like to call on the Governments of Israel, Syria and Lebanon to resume their talks as soon as possible.
It is indeed in the interests of all the peoples of the region to resume, without further delay or preconditions, their talks on the problem of the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as to resolve the problem of southern Lebanon and western Bekaa on the basis of the Security Council resolution 425 (1978).

It is common knowledge that international relations in the last decades have been largely dominated by reliance on military strength, the development of sophisticated weapons systems and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. All these characteristics have been observed in the region of the Middle East. We are convinced that the Middle East peace process could have been much more vigorous and irreversible if it had been supported by confidence- and security-building measures and agreements related to preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and to eliminating them.

In this regard, Ukraine believes that accession by all the States of the region to the international agreements on nuclear non-proliferation and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction remains of paramount importance for the peace process in the Middle East. We are also of the view that general support by the countries of the region for the implementation of the idea of establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region would favourably affect the Middle East peace process.

We are also of the view that, at this crucial period of the Middle East peace process, the international community should redouble its efforts to encourage all the parties to follow the path of negotiations and reconciliation with a view to moving forward towards finding compromise solutions to the existing problems. Undoubtedly, the United Nations continues to have a special responsibility in this effort.

In our view, the United Nations should continue to shoulder its primary responsibility for ensuring the exercise by the Palestinian people of its inalienable rights, including the right to self-determination and statehood. This Organization should remain a principal guarantor of international legitimacy with respect to the question of Palestine and a major headquarters of international support of and assistance to the Palestinian people.

I would like to emphasize the importance of economic assistance to the Palestinian people and to the entire region. We praise the commitment of the international donor community to assisting the Palestinian people in its economic development. This was confirmed once again at the latest donor meeting, held at Tokyo on 14 October this year. Ukraine lends its full support to the activities of the specialized bodies of the United Nations family, in particular the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which marks this year its fiftieth anniversary, and the United Nations Development Programme in providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people.

We also hope that the recent appointment by the Secretary-General of his new Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the

Palestinian Authority will give new impetus to the United Nations involvement in that process.

The development of mutually beneficial and partnership relations, on both bilateral and multilateral bases, with all the countries of the Middle East and the facilitation of the peace process remain one of the pillars of my country's foreign policy. In this respect, I would like to reiterate Ukraine's interest in joining the activities of the multilateral working groups on Middle East economic cooperation and providing its military and civilian personnel to United Nations peacekeeping operations in the region.

Let me conclude by expressing Ukraine's sincere wish to see the Middle East soon become a region in which all its peoples can live in lasting peace and economic prosperity in a spirit of good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation. Ukraine reconfirms its strong commitment to achieving this noble goal.

Mr. Zackheos (Cyprus): My delegation aligns itself with the statement of the European Union. I should like, however, in view of the special significance that Cyprus attaches to the issue, to make a few additional comments and observations.

Cyprus's long and rich history has always been heavily influenced by developments in the Middle East. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia, Cyprus has, throughout the centuries, served as a bridge between the peoples of the Middle East and Europe. While focusing on strengthening our ties with the European Union, with which we are currently conducting accession negotiations, the promotion of relations with our neighbours in the Middle East remains a significant pillar of our foreign policy. As a neighbouring country having excellent relations with all the countries in the region, we see our role as one of facilitator of cooperation and understanding among the peoples of the Middle East.

We realize that peace will be the catalyst of positive developments of unprecedented scope. This is the reason why my Government supports all the initiatives aimed at finding a just and comprehensive settlement bringing lasting peace and security to the Middle East. We reaffirm our support for the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), which provide the framework for a viable peace in the Middle East.

The Government of Cyprus remains committed to playing its part in a practical way towards the enhancement of the peace process. A fundamental element of our position in the Middle East — and indeed in all situations of occupation — is the withdrawal of foreign forces from occupied territories. We reaffirm our support for all the efforts that are being exerted to establish peace, security, stability and economic prosperity throughout the region. At the same time, we recognize the right of all States to exist in peace with their neighbours within secure and internationally recognized borders. In this context, we call for respect of this principle and denounce, in the strongest terms, terrorism and violence against innocent civilians.

While we consider the Palestinian problem to be the core issue of the Middle East conflict, we support the resumption of negotiations between Israel and Syria and the opening of talks between Israel and Lebanon, since we believe that only a comprehensive settlement will cement trust between the peoples of the Middle East, laying the foundations of security, stability, regional cooperation and prosperity for all.

On the occasion of the commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr. Glafcos Clerides, reaffirmed the close bonds of friendship between the Cypriot and the Palestinian peoples and saluted the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum last September, since this constitutes a giant step forward towards peace.

The parties have set themselves a very ambitious timetable for completing both the framework and the final agreement. Everyone realizes that the road ahead will be a difficult one, requiring determination and political will in order to find a compromise meeting the interests of all and the demands of justice. Nevertheless, we do not underestimate the considerable obstacles that remain. The opponents of peace, irrespective of their motives, remain attached to the old enmities and prejudices. Acts of terrorism are still possible. The international community must remain vigilant in supporting the peace process and denouncing the forces of the past.

We owe it to all courageous leaders, both within and outside the region, to keep the vision alive of a peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Some, such as President Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Rabin of Israel, paid the ultimate price for their ideals. King Hussein of Jordan died without seeing a comprehensive peace, to which he

so greatly contributed in various ways, including by signing the Jordanian-Israeli peace accords and by helping to overcome the final obstacles to arriving at the Wye River Memorandum in his final days, as he himself waged a courageous fight against cancer.

Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat have our admiration and encouragement as they embark on the road of peace. This new impetus in the peace process demonstrates that the combination of political will on the part of the sides involved in sustaining international efforts and influence can successfully lead to the resolution of otherwise intractable conflicts that pose a threat to regional and international stability. We hold this to be true also in the case of the Cyprus problem. It is our earnest hope that the positive evolution of the peace process in the Middle East will have beneficial effects the world over, including on the question of Cyprus, which has continued unresolved for a quarter-century due to the failure in implementing Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

The cold war is over, but antagonism and divergent interests persist and have manifested themselves in conflicts that we had hoped would only remain in some dark wayside of human history. The edifice of international relations is threatened and basic principles of international law are either ignored, challenged or selectively applied. Globalization cements the interdependence of our planet, while at the same time the gap between rich and poor continues expanding. Ethnic strife and political fragmentation are on the rise. In these circumstances, the international community is awakening to the need for reconciliation and welcoming any positive developments on the international scene. The settlement of the Middle East problem will send a strong message throughout the globe that there is still hope that diplomacy can succeed in reversing the dire consequences of hatred and conflict and securing peace, stability and prosperity well into the next millennium.

Mr. Dausá Céspedes (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): Today as never before the Palestinian people and the people of all occupied Arab territories are undergoing a critical moment in their history. Madrid, Oslo and Wye River have made it look as though the peace process would become a reality. Yet all these efforts have been frustrated by hostile and aggressive actions taken by the occupying Power, which, far from showing itself ready to negotiate, has continued its policy of illegal settlements and violation of international law and human rights of the Arab people who live the bitter reality of living under occupation.

Hopes were rekindled after the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum. However, despite encouraging signs, the genuine efforts to achieve a just and lasting peace in the region continue to run up against incidents and actions contrary to peace and stability in the region. Despite the clear condemnation by the international community, the policy of illegal settlements pursued by the Israeli Government is maintained, as are deportations, ill treatment and all forms of abuse against the Arab populations. Measures such as these and any others designed to alter the legal status and the demographic composition of the Arab territories under occupation, which are null from the start, violate the most basic norms of international law and international humanitarian law. The social, political and economic consequences and all kinds of adverse effects of the Israeli occupation among the Palestinian and Arab people could not be worse. The harm done to health, the deterioration in sanitary conditions, the psychological consequences, the difficulties in the educational system, the impossibility of achieving family reunification and the limitations placed on freedom of movement all constitute the terrible daily reality of life in the occupied territories.

It is incredible that as we are entering the twenty-first century, and despite more than 25 Security Council resolutions and many more adopted by the General Assembly at special and regular sessions, we have not been able to reach a lasting resolution of the Middle East conflict. This unbelievable reality can be explained only by Israel's total lack of respect for these decisions of the international community and the traditional support of all kinds that the United States Government has offered its strategic ally in the region. The international community expects and demands that this time peace prevail and that a just and lasting solution to the conflict in the Middle East be found.

It is necessary to promote the greatest possible support in political, economic and moral terms for achieving peace. The United Nations has a great share of the responsibility for this task. Solidarity with the Palestinian people and the rest of the Arab people living under occupation is a question of principles for the Cuban Government and people. It means that we support and defend full respect for all the legitimate rights of these fraternal peoples. For that reason we reaffirm that the Israeli occupation of all Arab and Palestinian occupied territories and the violation of the human rights of the people in these territories must end. Though the Palestinian question constitutes the cornerstone of the Arab-Israeli conflict and there cannot be a permanent

solution without fully meeting the just demands of the Palestinian people, neither can there be a lasting solution if we do not put an end to aggression and the occupation of the territories in Lebanon and the Syrian Golan.

We all have a responsibility to assume, and we cannot rest until we achieve a just and peaceful settlement of the Middle East conflict. The occupation and the annexation of territory cannot be the starting point for any peace negotiations in the area. It is time for Israel to show its readiness to negotiate and its commitment to peace and security in the region. It is time to put an end to occupation and aggression. It is time to stop trampling the rights of the Palestinian and Arab peoples. It is time that all the forces that defend peace unite in defence of the noble cause of the Palestinian and Arab peoples subjected to occupation. The traditional solidarity and support of the Cuban Government will not be lacking in these efforts.

The Acting President (*spoke in French*): I call on the Observer of Palestine.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*spoke in Arabic*): There is agreement in the international community that the question of Palestine, with its strong and direct repercussions, is the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East as a whole. However, the situation in the Middle East has other important aspects that are also the subject of much attention aimed at reaching appropriate solutions and achieving a comprehensive peace in the region.

At the outset, I wish to refer to specific aspects of the question of Palestine, whose dimensions extend to the regional situation and perhaps even farther. There is the issue of Jerusalem, which is at the heart of the question of Palestine. At the same time, Jerusalem has a central importance for the Arab world and for the Islamic and Christian worlds in general. Therefore, reaching an acceptable solution to the status of Jerusalem based on international legitimacy is a prerequisite for solving the question of Palestine in its totality and for establishing peace and stability in the region as a whole.

There is also the issue of Palestinian refugees. There are still approximately 2 million Palestinian refugees, out of approximately 4 million who live in the Arab countries neighbouring Israel. While we appreciate our Arab brethren hosting our refugees and bearing an immense burden in this regard, including providing them with reasonable living conditions without discrimination, we reiterate that the real and just solution to the refugee problem is the implementation of General Assembly resolution 194 III of 1948), which reaffirms their right to return to their homes and properties and to compensation for those who do not wish to return.

I also refer to Palestinians displaced from Palestinian territory during the 1967 war. They number around 700,000. Moreover, I refer to Israel's procrastination and its refusal to allow them to return in accordance with Security Council resolution 237 (1967), which was also supposed to be put into effect during the transitional period in accordance with the agreements between the two sides.

Israel continues to occupy other Arab territories, in addition to the Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem. It continues to occupy the Syrian Golan and southern Lebanon. Israel persists in violating international law, international humanitarian law and the United Nations resolutions relevant to these two areas. We reiterate the necessity for full Israeli withdrawal from the Syrian Golan in implementation of Security Council resolution 242 (1967), and we affirm the necessity to resume negotiations on the Syrian-Israeli track of the peace process, starting at the point where the negotiations broke off.

With regard to Lebanon, we affirm the need for Israel's unconditional withdrawal from Lebanese territory in implementation of Security Council resolution 425 (1978). We also call for the resumption of negotiations on the Lebanese-Israeli track.

Israel's insistence on possessing nuclear capabilities and its refusal to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and to place its nuclear facilities under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) put the whole region in grave danger. This position will undoubtedly lead to further complications in this sensitive area, including the possibility of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction of all types in the region, in addition to other dangers or risks, such as the possibility of unintentional destruction in this small and densely populated area.

In addition, there is Israel's insistence — as well as that of some of its friends — on pursuing armaments in general. This includes the establishment of new armaments systems, including missile systems. Some of Israel's friends used to claim that their arming of Israel was a reaction to the former Soviet Union's arming of some Arab parties. However, they now declare publicly that they want to preserve Israel's military qualitative

edge. Peace cannot be achieved through military might, and it will never grow and prosper under the mentality of deterrence and military edge. We affirm the necessity for stopping armaments to the region, and we affirm in particular the necessity for establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone, one also free of other weapons of mass destruction, in the Middle East.

The scarcity of water in the Middle East region is one of the important problems that may be increasingly exacerbated in the coming years. It is regrettable that Israel has not ceased its theft of Arab water resources, stealing enormous quantities of water from Palestinian and other Arab sources. It is imperative that Israel cease this and recognize the rights of others, as well as the Arab parties' permanent sovereignty over their natural resources, including water, in order to pave the way for finding long-term solutions to this serious problem.

Solutions should have already been found for some of these issues; they should have been negotiated through the multilateral negotiating channels. However, the continuous, intransigent Israeli position in violation of international legitimacy with regard to returning the occupied Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories to their rightful sovereigns, which is the first and basic prerequisite for establishing peace, continues to impede the effective resumption of these negotiations.

We hope that through a speedy resumption of the Syrian track and through progress on the Palestinian track we may move to a stage where we can look into other regional problems, with the aim of finding solutions that will promote the establishment of peace and the consolidation of its foundations.

How can peace be achieved in the Middle East? How can this important region become involved in a genuine development process, utilizing its available potential? The key to such a strategic achievement is to address our deep feelings, even our conviction as Arabs that an unprecedented and grave injustice has befallen us. It is our conviction that some parties promote certain values for themselves, while applying different values to others in the region. It is our conviction that the principles of the Charter, of international law and of international humanitarian law and the priorities of the international community are put aside by those parties when the issue concerns Israel.

What is required is an end to such practice — an end to double standards, and the upholding of the same values and the same international law. It begins with terminating foreign occupation and respecting the principle of the right of peoples to self-determination. After that, it will be more feasible to achieve all other important goals on the same basis of establishing peace and prosperity for all the peoples in the Middle East region.

Yesterday, the representative of the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations expressed our position vis-à-vis the question of Palestine. However, I cannot fail to say a few words in response to the statement made by the representative of Israel a few minutes ago. For example, what he said concerning Jerusalem really makes light of the position of the international community. It is a direct challenge to the will of the international community, to the will of the Assembly. This Israeli position is not only different from the Palestinian position but violates international law and General Assembly and Security Council resolutions.

Let me refer here to the fact that the Security Council has repeatedly stressed in its relevant resolutions that Jerusalem is an indivisible part of the occupied land and that all Israeli measures aimed at changing the legal and demographic status of the city of Jerusalem are null and void. A repetition of that Israeli position in this house of international legitimacy requires in itself the condemnation of the international community and not merely a reaffirmation of its position vis-à-vis Jerusalem based on international legitimacy and law. I shall not respond to the Israeli delegate's attempts at distorting history. Let me just say that negotiations on the future of the city must not and cannot mean that Israel can take a position violating international law and international legitimacy and impose it by force on the Palestinian side. We will not accept that — not now, not ever.

As for the Israeli delegate's reference to the development cooperation programme, I hope that it will not lead to the belief that things on the ground are just fine. Until a final settlement is reached and peace is established, the relationship will remain a relationship between an occupying power on the one hand and an occupied people on the other.

As for speaking of the Arab diplomatic offensive at a time when talks are taking place, it is, frankly, the ultimate in irony. Let me just say that the Israeli side, using naked force once again and at the time when talks are taking place, continues to confiscate land, our land, the land of the Palestinian people. It continues to transfer Israeli civilians to occupied Palestinian land; it continues

to build offensive settlements that are harmful and destructive to the peace process; it continues its illegitimate policies in the city of Jerusalem; and it continues to hamper any true and serious Palestinian economic development. Such illegitimate measures run counter to all the agreements and positions expressed regarding peace.

Now the representative of Israel — or rather, the representatives of Israel — are calling on the Palestinian side to put aside international law, to set aside the resolutions of the United Nations. They do not want us to complain to the international community about the treatment meted out to us. International law and international legitimacy are, and will remain, the foundation for reaching a final bilateral agreement between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, if such an agreement is to achieve a durable, comprehensive and just peace as well as stability in the region. This is precisely what we want.

Ms. Wensley (Australia): The year 1999 did not start off as a particularly auspicious one for the Middle East peace process. It seemed that both sides in the peace negotiations were experiencing difficulty in rebuilding much of that sense of common purpose which had developed over the preceding five years since the original Oslo agreement.

The half year between the Wye River agreement and the Israeli general elections on 17 May was a frustrating one for all those who had worked so hard to get the peace process back on track. But while the period was not an easy one, neither was it one where it seemed to us that the peace process was in serious danger of collapse. This was essentially because all those involved in striving for genuine peace in the Middle East know that they have no alternative but to keep the peace process alive.

The 1993 Oslo agreement marked a sea change in the search for peace in the Middle East. It is true that difficulties and frustrations have attended almost every step in this process. But we must remember that it is a process: a series of steps which build upon each other so that the final result, which we firmly believe to be achievable, will have come about through gradual, careful and deliberate negotiation and not through imperfect solutions imposed from outside or as a consequence of inherent power imbalances or short-term political expediency.

This does not make for spectacular breakthroughs or overnight changes of heart. But it does provide the space necessary for two peoples to become accustomed to the idea of cohabitation and cooperation.

This was why Australia welcomed the 4 September Sharm el- Sheikh Memorandum, which breathed new life into the peace process by re-establishing the basis of trust and of common purpose between the two sides.

We should all commend Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat for their commitment and their hard work. We also acknowledge the constructive role played by Egypt in facilitating the agreement at Sharm el-Sheikh.

We applaud the ongoing and tireless efforts of the United States to provide positive and imaginative encouragement to the negotiating parties.

We recognize, however, that the timetable drawn up at Sharm el-Sheikh is an ambitious one. We offer the parties every encouragement in their efforts to meet the deadlines set down.

Nobody is under any illusion that the most complex, sensitive, emotionally charged and physically challenging issues in the Israeli-Palestinian context remain to be resolved. These include the place of the Palestinians in the international community, the status of Jerusalem, settlements, border delineation, the future of Palestinian refugees throughout the region, particularly in Lebanon, and such vexed and vital questions as the allocation of water resources.

To this end, we very much welcome the intention of both sides to seek initially a framework agreement by February, and we welcome the reaffirmation of the parties at the November Oslo summit to work with vigour towards reaching this interim framework agreement.

We believe that there must be a renewed effort to engage Syria and Lebanon in the negotiating process on the basis of the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978). Australia believes that a lasting settlement can be successful only if the sovereignty of each of the parties is respected, if there are effective guarantees for Israel's security and if there is an outcome regarding the Golan Heights which is acceptable both to Syria and to Israel.

So, at a time when there is renewed and realistic hope of genuine progress in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, we call on Israel, on Syria and on Lebanon to seize the opportunity to work towards a regional peace which will be truly comprehensive.

My Government has consistently condemned terrorism in all its forms in the context of the Middle East peace process. We reiterated that condemnation over the recent indiscriminate and callous bombing in the Israeli city of Netanya. We also hope that the renewed atmosphere of peace in the region will lead to a situation in which both Israeli and Lebanese civilians will no longer become victims of tit-for-tat violence.

We have also called upon all parties involved in peace negotiations to avoid other actions which might threaten the revitalized sense of optimism in the wake of Sharm el-Sheikh. Australia regards settlement activity in the occupied territories as both contrary to international law and harmful to the peace process.

We have continued to express our concern over the past year over the emergency special session process. My Government took a strong view against the holding last July of a conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to discuss measures to enforce the Convention in the occupied territories.

Frankly, we were astonished at the proposed timing of that conference, virtually days after the forming of a new Israeli Government which had committed itself to pursuing peace. We were also concerned about the dangers of the politicization of one of the most effective humanitarian instruments that the international community has been able to devise. We hope that the emergency special sessions will not need to be resumed.

The ongoing suffering of the Iraqi people — a subject of continuing concern to us — is, in our view, directly attributable to the unwillingness of Iraq to comply with United Nations Security Council resolutions. It is the Iraqi leadership that holds the key to alleviating the suffering of the Iraqi people. In the meantime, Australia continues to support humanitarian measures, such as the oil-for-food programme, that are directed at relieving the plight of the Iraqi people.

Australia remains concerned that for over a year now no weapons inspections have been undertaken in Iraq. We look forward to the early conclusion of negotiations in the Security Council on a new omnibus resolution on Iraq setting out, *inter alia*, the shape of a future weapons inspection regime. We urge Iraq to comply fully with all Security Council requirements in relation to its weapons programme.

As the situation in Iraq illustrates, the Middle East is a region where the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles is a vexed issue. We acknowledge that our common goal of promoting the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has to be seen within a broader vision of peace in the Middle East. Nonetheless, we strongly urge all States in the Middle East that have not already done so to become parties to all these instruments.

With regard to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), we have warmly welcomed the accession to the Treaty by the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti and Oman since the landmark 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference. We reiterate our appeal to Israel, as the only regional State yet to accede to the Treaty, to give serious consideration to the security benefits for itself and for the region of acceding to the Treaty and of placing its nuclear facilities under international safeguards.

Australia recognizes that the Middle East will be an important issue for consideration at next year's NPT Review Conference. We encourage those countries most directly engaged to continue their dialogue, with a view to resolving their differences to the greatest degree possible prior to the Review Conference or finding a way of managing these issues at the Review Conference itself.

Australia was pleased to support the consensus draft resolution adopted this year in the First Committee on the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East.

We will continue to work with others to maintain the strength and momentum of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which embodies the global norm against nuclear testing. We urge all countries in the Middle East region that have not yet done so to sign and ratify the CTBT at an early date.

We welcome the fact that States of the region have joined the international consensus to begin negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty. Once concluded, a universal and effectively verifiable cut-off treaty will serve as another valuable security- and confidence-building mechanism in the Middle East and, obviously, in other regions of tension such as South Asia, and more broadly.

We also urge all States in the region to ratify the Chemical and the Biological Weapons Conventions, as

these heinous weapons of mass destruction pose one of the most serious threats to regional and global security and must, in our view, be countered. In addition, we urge regional States to support efforts to bring negotiations on a verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention to a successful conclusion as soon as possible.

Australia urges Middle East States to contribute to efforts to strengthen the global regime against landmines, including by ratifying the Ottawa landmines-ban Convention, in support of the Convention's ultimate universalization. We recognize that coordinated international assistance, in association with effective national mine action programmes, will help address problems in the Middle East, and also in other mine-affected regions, resulting from the emplacement of landmines.

Finally, on this subject of disarmament with respect to the Middle East, it is of concern to us that a number of Middle Eastern countries continue to develop and to proliferate long-range ballistic missiles. We urge States in the Middle East region to exercise maximum restraint in the development and the proliferation of long-range ballistic missiles.

In conclusion, let me return to prospects for peace in the Middle East. Last year we were very cautious in expressing the hope that 1999 would see real progress in the peace process. While our assessment now is that the atmosphere is more favourable in the region than it has been for some years, we are conscious that many of the problems yet to be resolved do not lend themselves to easy solutions. Negotiations between even the closest of friends can become acrimonious and time-consuming; and we are well aware that there are many in the Middle East who have suffered grievously over generations and who find it hard to forget past injustices. But it has been the strength of support for peace on both sides that, we believe, has been instrumental in their making the enormous strides thus far towards a resolution of such an old conflict.

Israelis and Palestinians both have made it clear that overwhelming majorities of their peoples want the security and safety of a permanent peace because they know only too well how pointless and destructive is the alternative. Though it is still early days, we welcome what we perceive as a growing sense among hitherto sceptical groups on both sides that the current peace process must be given every chance of success. We would urge all parties to the peace process to build an ever-widening constituency for peace through cooperation at all levels, especially in enhancing people-to-people contacts.

Australia is not a key player in the politics of the Middle East, but we address this issue as a concerned member of the international community. We think it important that even non-key players throw their support behind what is a historic opportunity for peace. We would urge all members of the international community to give credit to those leaders who take the hard decisions for peace — often in the face of overwhelming domestic opposition — and who, as we have seen twice already in recent history, have paid for this with their lives.

This year saw the loss of two other Middle East leaders who were instrumental in creating the international atmosphere necessary for the peace process to move forward. In February we all mourned the loss of King Hussein of Jordan, who had done so much, not only as a beloved and respected leader of his own people during one of the most turbulent and difficult periods in the history of the Middle East, but also as a pillar of strength behind the peace process that grew out of the Madrid Peace Conference.

We were also saddened by the death, in July, of King Hassan of Morocco, who played an important role — one often unrecognized and unheralded — in building a belief in the region that peace was an achievable and worthy goal.

The wisdom of both these leaders will be sorely missed.

As a fitting legacy to those who have paved the way, it is our earnest hope that the forthcoming year will see steady movement towards a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. We know there are no magic formulas, and we know that cool heads on both sides are not promising such formulas. It is, however, inevitable that expectations are raised each time there is a sign of a new willingness to compromise. We would urge all parties in the region to respond to signs of willingness to compromise by themselves displaying an equal willingness, and to join with their neighbours in seeking imaginative solutions to the region's problems. We look forward to a positive year for peace in the Middle East.

Mr. Ould Deddach (Mauritania) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Islamic Republic of Mauritania pursues a foreign policy based on firm foundations: good neighbourliness, peaceful coexistence and the strengthening of cooperation

at the regional and international levels. In implementation of these principles, my country attaches great importance to the consolidation of stability and the containment of the many hotbeds of tension in various parts of the world, hotbeds that threaten international peace and security and hamper development in various regions of the world.

My country is following the situation in the Middle East closely and attentively. In this regard, while reaffirming anew our full support for the peace process, we believe that no just, lasting and comprehensive peace can be established in this region save on the basis of the Madrid frame of reference — the principle of land for peace, and the full implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978). This will ensure the full withdrawal of Israel from the occupied Palestinian territories, the Syrian Golan Heights, southern Lebanon and western Bekaa. It will also ensure restoration of the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people, foremost among which is their right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state, with Jerusalem as its capital.

Today, as we approach a new era, the international community looks forward to reviving the peace process and returning it to its proper track. This will require taking the necessary measures for the resumption of negotiations on all tracks. In this regard, we support the Syrian demand to resume negotiations at the point where they left off. It is our hope that the co-sponsors of the peace process will make every effort to ensure that the opportunity to achieve peace in the region is not lost.

Peace is a strategic choice. There is no substitute for it. This has been Mauritania's consistent position since the Madrid Peace Conference, and this is how Mauritania has viewed the Oslo agreements and the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum.

Proceeding from its national principles and the importance it attaches to the Islamic and Arab causes, Mauritania reaffirms that its position is firm and will never change. In this regard, we renew our support for all resolutions relevant to the question of the Middle East and the sacred question of Palestine, particularly those pertaining to Jerusalem and the refugees.

Mr. Vural (Turkey): Our discussion of the situation in the Middle East is taking place today in a somewhat more positive and promising environment. The peace process has gone through a difficult phase during the last three years. There was a strong erosion of confidence between the parties. With the general elections in Israel, a new atmosphere has emerged, and the process has started to move forward.

We are happy to note that there is a desire on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, for moving the peace process forward. The most important element would be to create an atmosphere of confidence. This requires adherence to previous commitments.

The Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum for the implementation of the Wye River Memorandum has been an important move in the right direction. With the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, the final status talks have already started. The decision to conclude a framework agreement in five months and a final status agreement in a year are key goals to be achieved.

The Oslo meetings of 1 and 2 November of this year were useful and served the purpose of getting the two sides to move ahead. We congratulate the leaders of Israel and Palestine on their courageous and wise stand, which has made this breakthrough possible. Those who have inspired, sponsored and supported these important steps, the United States Administration in the first place, also deserve our high praise.

This year, we lost two prominent leaders of the Middle East who had dedicated themselves to the peace process. We all remember with great appreciation and affection the role played by His late Majesty King Hussein of Jordan and His late Majesty King Hassan of Morocco.

It is our sincere expectation that both the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships will remain engaged in the full implementation of the Madrid and Oslo accords. International political and economic support to the continuation of this process is as important as the initial backing it has received. My Government is committed to do its part in this respect.

The situation in the Middle East and the delicate nature of the peace process require our constant attention. The recent positive developments should not lead the parties and the international community to ignore the existence of the three major obstacles before the peace process, which are the following.

Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978) still remain to be implemented. Terrorism, violence and extremism continue to be serious

risk factors for peace and stability. As a country that has suffered immensely from terrorism, Turkey believes that those countries that refuse to renounce all terrorist activities cannot be treated as reliable and credible actors in the peace process. And finally, socio-economic deprivation, unless urgently addressed, could very well undermine the diplomatic and political gains made.

There is no doubt that the parties to the peace process still have considerable obligations and responsibilities to fulfil. Discontinuation of the illegal settlement activities in the occupied territories, including Jerusalem, is a priority in this respect.

The Wye River process, enhanced by the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, should also inspire the parties of the other bilateral tracks of the peace process, namely Israel, Syria and Lebanon. They should be able to resume negotiations on the basis of the principles of the Madrid Peace Conference and the relevant Security Council resolutions.

The resumption of talks on the other tracks, which Turkey will welcome, should not cause the Israeli-Palestinian track to be sidestepped. We are ready to continue to make contributions to the multilateral track once it has been resumed.

The Palestinian issue lies at the core of the Middle East question. It will not be possible to reach lasting peace and stability unless the problem is solved in line with the just, legitimate and rightful aspirations of the Palestinian people. The people, Parliament and Government of Turkey are united, strong supporters of the just cause of the Palestinian people. We believe that the international community should remain alert to the situation and difficulties of the Palestinian people. The living conditions of the Palestinians need to be urgently improved in order to build a sustainable level of economic and social well-being and prosperity. In this context, being privileged to serve as Chairman of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), I would like, from this rostrum, to emphasize that enhanced support for UNRWA by Member States continues to be important, now more than ever. Over the years, we have helped to promote the needs and aspirations of the Palestinians and provided direct help for the realization of their legitimate aspirations.

As a regional Power and player with long-established ties to the Middle East, Turkey maintains good-neighbourly relations with all the countries of the region. We share a common history, geography and culture that bind us together. We enjoy good relations with Israel, as well as with all the Arab countries. One of Turkey's main foreign policy objectives is to find peace — a lasting and comprehensive peace — in this conflict torn region. We have always advocated dialogue and mutual tolerance as the means to attain that objective. We believe that the success of the peace process will create an environment conducive to the enhancement of cooperation between the countries in the region, particularly in the economic field.

Throughout history, the Middle East has contributed immensely to our material and spiritual enrichment, both as human beings and societies. A fertile land for culture and tolerance has turned into the battlefield of the twentieth century. The peoples of the region have been victims of endless wars and conflicts. The only way to turn this tide is to ensure the continuation and successful completion of the peace process. There is no alternative. Both the parties directly involved and the international community must help the Middle East regain its spiritual and material prominence in the international system.

Mr. Jemat (Brunei Darussalam): I would like first of all to join other speakers in thanking the Secretary-General for his report (A/54/457) on the situation in the Middle East and the question of Palestine.

The Middle East situation has always been an issue of grave concern to all of us here. We therefore welcome the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement as an important achievement for the final status negotiations. Brunei Darussalam is particularly encouraged to see the continued implementation of its provisions, including the redeployment of Israeli forces in the West Bank and the opening of the safe passages. We are also pleased to note that this progress has led to the recent Oslo gathering. There is still, however, a long way to go before a lasting peace can be truly achieved. The remaining issues, such as the borders of the Palestinian State, the status of Jerusalem and the fate of millions of displaced persons are yet to be resolved.

Brunei Darussalam believes that lasting peace for the people of the region must be based on relevant Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace. The freezing of settlement activities and the evacuation of settlers are also vital if lasting peace is to be achieved. Attempts to change the demographic nature of the occupied Arab lands serves only to exacerbate tension.

We hope to see the full implementation of the interim agreements and some progress on other tracks of the peace process. We welcome the negotiators' indication that the question of Palestine could be resolved soon, and we would like to reiterate our full support for ongoing peaceful dialogue as a means for achieving a just and comprehensive settlement. The conclusion of the negotiations on the final status would be a major breakthrough.

Finally, we wish to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to all members of the international community who have contributed to revitalizing the peace process and renewing its momentum. We would also like to express our continued support to the Palestinian people for their just and legitimate struggle for peace, freedom and an independent homeland.

Mr. Arhin (Ghana): The unprecedented hope which greeted the Madrid Peace Conference was reversed three years ago as the international community began to witness the degeneration of the peace process into a state of almost permanent stalemate. The inversion was caused by the lack of progress in the negotiations, owing to the reluctance of one party to implement agreements that had already been concluded. Given the stalemate, an upsurge in violence was inevitable. Fortunately, a return to the way of peace seems possible again, following recent positive signals in the region.

My delegation welcomes the revitalization of the peace process and urges all parties to stay the course until a comprehensive and lasting peace, based on the principle of land for peace and on the relevant Security Council resolutions, has been achieved. We are encouraged by the historic pledge of Prime Minister Ehud Barak to make the pursuit of peace on all three tracks of the Middle East issue the supreme goal of his Government. The Sharm el-Sheikh accord, reached between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, is a source of hope for the restoration of the peace process on the Lebanese and Syrian tracks. To this end, it is essential that all the parties avoid unilateral actions and omissions which could pose difficulties to the peace process.

Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories, including East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan, as well as southern Lebanon and western Bekaa, is a necessary condition for the achievement of durable peace.

In this context, my delegation is gravely concerned by Israel's continued insensitivity to the international community's objections to the building of Jewish settlements.

It is my delegation's prayer that the occupation of southern Lebanon and the western Bekaa will soon be consigned to the pages of history and that Lebanon's sovereignty over that part of its territory will be restored. As recent events have eloquently manifested, the continued presence of an occupying force in southern Lebanon is a constant source of violence. In January alone, the occupying force and its allies launched over 100 armed attacks on Lebanese towns and villages, resulting in the destruction of innocent lives and property. The occupation has posed an unnecessary challenge to the Lebanese Government as it grapples with the monumental task of development while trying to consolidate the country's nascent political stability.

The existence of Israeli settlements in the occupied Syrian Golan has been an impediment to progress on the Israel-Syrian track. My delegation reaffirms its support for Syria's right to reclaim its territory. We believe that, as intractable as this aspect may seem to be, the time to make progress is now. To that end, we urge both sides to make the compromises necessary for peace and to demonstrate to the world their relentlessness in the pursuit of that noble and laudable objective.

We take this opportunity to pay tribute to the gallant men and women — including, I am proud to mention, nationals of my own country — who are serving with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and with the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force in the Syrian Arab Republic. They have, without any doubt, acquitted themselves creditably in a difficult and often dangerous environment. We salute all those who have had to make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of international peace and security.

There is a time for war and a time for peace. Peace in the Middle East need not be elusive. It can be achieved, but only through constructive negotiations, dynamic compromises and the sincerity of the parties in abiding by existing agreements. It is our fervent conviction that, sooner rather than later, peaceful coexistence will be brought about between Israel and its neighbours.

Mr. Vantsevich (Belarus) (*spoke in Russian*): The Republic of Belarus has always considered developments in the Middle East peace process to be of paramount importance. The tangible results achieved over the past

few months towards a peaceful settlement in the Middle East give rise to hope that the stagnation that characterized the peace process in the past will at last come to an end.

Belarus welcomes the recent signing at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, of the Memorandum between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), because it can provide major impetus towards the irreversibility of a peaceful settlement and towards the return of the parties to timely and scrupulous implementation of agreements already achieved, the foundations for which were laid at the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and strengthened in 1993 with the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements and with subsequent implementation agreements. We were inspired by the recent palpable steps taken by the Palestinians and the Israelis to move their positions closer together with a view to reestablishing a climate of trust and constructive partnership. This has been reflected in such events as the opening of a road between Gaza and the West Bank, which unquestionably constituted a major step towards addressing humanitarian, social and economic problems in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

In the view of Belarus, there can be no successful settlement in the Middle East unless the role of the United Nations is maintained and enhanced. The Organization's constructive contribution to peace-building in the region is recognized by all. It is our firm belief that the principle of land for peace and the unconditional implementation by all parties of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) form the very foundation of the Middle East peace process. In that context, Belarus welcomed the outcome of the international Conference of High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, convened on 15 July 1999 at Geneva in response to General Assembly resolution ES-10/6. At that Conference the international community affirmed the applicability of the Convention to the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. Belarus views the outcome of the Conference as reflecting the continued significance and constructive role of the United Nations in the achievement of a settlement in the Middle East.

Belarus fully supports the activities of relevant bodies in the United Nations system, donor countries and intergovernmental organizations intended to redress the negative social, humanitarian and economic impact on the Palestinian population of tension in the Middle East. In our view, the efforts of the international community on this matter are an important — an integral — part of a comprehensive settlement of the situation in the Middle East. One of the key outcomes of such a settlement must be the enjoyment by the Palestinian people of its inalienable right to self-determination and independence.

Belarus is convinced that it is absolutely necessary that there be progress on all three negotiating tracks in the Middle East peace process: the Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese tracks. Here, Belarus is prepared to welcome any initiative from the parties that could help establish a just and lasting peace in the region.

Today we are witnessing an overall turn for the better in the quest for a peaceful settlement of the situation in the Middle East, and it is more important than ever before that the parties refrain from any action that could have a negative impact on the fragile balance that is emerging as the peace process develops. In that connection, Belarus views as counterproductive any manifestation of extremism or terrorism as a way of pursuing political goals. We hope that the parties will make full use of the positive results that have been achieved to date in the process of achieving a peaceful settlement, including the adoption of active concerted measures to fight terrorism and extend cooperation in the field of security.

Belarus also reaffirms its commitment to the inalienable right of all States of the region to live within safe, internationally recognized boundaries.

In conclusion, I would express our confidence that the international community's broad-based support and assistance for the goal of a peaceful settlement of the situation in the Middle East will strengthen the peace process on its present course, so as to guarantee its continuity and its success.

Mr. Sharma (India): As in previous years, the General Assembly is once again discussing the situation in the Middle East. That region, a cradle of human civilization, is of importance and concern to the entire international community. To that region, tormented for decades by wars, terrorism, disputes and discords, the last decade of this millennium brought the hope, with the Madrid Conference of October 1991, that lasting peace was within its grasp. In the twin-track approach the Conference approved, India has participated in the multilateral track of the Middle East peace process and has attended the meetings of the working groups set up to discuss regional issues. We welcomed the Madrid Conference, the Oslo accords and the Wye River Memorandum. The Sharm-el Sheikh Memorandum,

signed between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) on 4 September 1999, setting out a mutually acceptable mechanism for implementing various interim agreements, such as Oslo II, the Hebron Protocol and the Wye River Memorandum, has once again proved that, given the required will and determination and a commitment to settle disputes peacefully, no odds are insurmountable, no goal too far. Diplomacy and statesmanship have once again triumphed. We welcome this.

We hope that the timely implementation of the Sharm-el Sheikh Memorandum will lead to the resolution of outstanding interim issues and help fulfil the aspirations of the people of the region. We also hope that the Memorandum will impart the necessary momentum for the successful completion of final status negotiations by September next year, as agreed between Israel and the PLO. We are happy to note that the first steps have been taken to implement the Sharm-el Sheikh Memorandum. It is our view, that any unilateral action which may delay or retard the peace process and is not in keeping with the letter and the spirit of the understandings arrived at should be avoided. We urge the parties concerned to implement the agreement in good faith and sincerity; this will also create the necessary environment for the timely and satisfactory conclusion of final status negotiations.

While there has been considerable progress in the peace process between the PLO and Israel, the same is not true of the Syrian and the Lebanese tracks, which have been stalemated for years now. We believe that progress on these tracks is equally important for a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the region, based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978) and the principle of land for peace, and enabling all countries of the region to live within internationally recognized and secure borders. We trust that early steps will be taken by the countries directly concerned to break this impasse.

India is vitally interested in peace, development and stability in the Middle East, a region close to our heart and with which we share bonds of history and culture, reinforced in modern times through multifaceted cooperation encompassing trade, investment, cultural exchanges, technical assistance and human resource development. We have a vibrant economic relationship with the region, which has one of our largest foreign investment projects and bilateral trade exceeding $1 billion. Over the years, we have shared our technical expertise and experience and have imparted technical training to a large number of nationals of the countries of that region, with which we remain committed to further diversifying and strengthening our bilateral relations. We wish these relations to expand in all cooperative areas in the years to come.

Mr. Picasso (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): The Peruvian delegation joins the general sense of optimism in greeting the resumption of the peace negotiations in the Middle East. The Sharm-el Sheikh Memorandum, signed in Egypt last September, is a clear demonstration of the readiness of the Palestinian and Israeli authorities to continue to move towards a permanent resolution of their differences. In doing this they had the important support and collaboration of friendly countries and countries facilitating the negotiations, from both within and outside the region. These are basic milestones in the construction of an area of peace, reconciliation, understanding, solidarity and justice in that region of such great historic, religious and cultural importance.

In recent years Peru has sought with determination to resolve its border problems on the understanding that they directly impede peace and development. On the way to the final agreements with Ecuador and with Chile, we have encountered difficulties and the ups and downs of negotiations. This has required much time, patience, imagination and dedication, but our peoples sincerely desire to achieve lasting peace and to enjoy the benefits that it brings. These efforts are allowing the emergence of a new regional political setting, that based on peace, respect for treaties, friendship, integration, cooperation and development, propels us and integrates us into the international community. If this experience teaches us one thing, it is that there cannot be any limits or any excuses for not making the necessary effort for peace.

In this regard, we encourage all States, particularly those directly involved, to continue to pool their wisdom and will in the search for peace in the Middle East, carrying forward the process that was begun in Oslo and Madrid and that has continued with the subsequent agreements, from the 1995 Israel-Palestine Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, signed in Washington, to the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum, to which we referred to earlier.

Similarly, we emphasize the need for complete compliance with the General Assembly resolutions that have been adopted on the basis of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law and humanitarian law, and particularly, with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), which provide

the basis for the Middle East peace process. This will contribute to promoting an irreversible world peace that will benefit all peoples, peoples of diverse religions, cultures and nationalities.

The cultural, artistic and religious event known as Bethlehem 2000 will be held in that city this December. The event will be taking place at a very special time of reflection and hope. The Peruvian delegation once again welcomes this initiative, convinced that it will contribute to encouraging dialogue and tolerance in the region and pleased that this project has received the unanimous support of the international community a few weeks ago in this very Hall.

The current conditions and the efforts that are being made inspire real hopes as to our chances of attaining the long-sought goal of peace in the Middle East. It is from this perspective that we encourage further progress and await hopefully the consolidation of this progress.

Mr. Yamazaki (Japan): Let me begin by expressing my delegation's appreciation to the Secretary-General for preparing the report (A/54/495) on agenda item 43, "The situation in the Middle East". Let me also reaffirm my Government's wholehearted support for the Middle East peace process and our hope to see the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace as soon as possible.

Last year in this Hall, Member States, including Japan, welcomed the signing of the Wye River Memorandum and expressed the hope that it would lead to real progress in the peace process. Unfortunately, the implementation of the Memorandum has encountered various obstacles, which has hampered progress in the overall Middle East peace process.

The signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum in September this year, which has given new momentum to the peace process, is therefore especially welcome. The Memorandum's greatest significance lies in the fact that by signing it, the new Israeli Government has demonstrated its renewed and constructive commitment to the peace process.

Japan is also encouraged that the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum has given much-needed impetus to the process by setting a time-frame for the permanent status negotiations — that is to say, the conclusion of a framework agreement by February 2000 and a comprehensive agreement by September of the same year.

Japan is pleased to note the steady implementation of the Memorandum, as exemplified by the opening of the southern safe passage route between the West Bank and Gaza. Indeed, each step in the Memorandum's implementation is extremely important, not only for the tangible progress it provides, but also because it helps build trust between the parties in their negotiations aimed at achieving the ultimate goal of peace. We sincerely hope that the implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum will help accelerate the envisaged negotiations leading up to a framework agreement and, ultimately, a comprehensive final status agreement.

The road to peace in the Middle East has been a long and difficult one for all parties concerned. My Government believes that a genuine peace can be achieved only through the sincere will and determination of the parties concerned to achieve a just and comprehensive outcome. Thus, we value and support all their efforts to advance the peace process, such as the meetings that were held in Oslo among the leaders of the relevant parties earlier this month.

Japan has supported the current Middle East peace process since it was launched in Madrid in 1991. Recognizing that its successful conclusion is essential for the stability and development of the region and, indeed, of the world as a whole, Japan has actively supported and continues to support international efforts towards that end. It is determined to take every opportunity to foster an environment that is conducive to direct negotiations between the parties concerned. Japan has been an active participant in the multilateral tracks by serving as the gavel-holder of the Working Group on Environment and as the shepherd of the tourism workshop of the Regional Economic Development Working Group. At the same time, my Government has also been making various efforts at the bilateral level to encourage the Arab and Israeli sides to make further progress in the peace process.

Last month, Japan hosted the ministerial-level Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting in Tokyo in order to coordinate and promote the assistance efforts of donor countries. At that meeting Japan announced that it would play a political role in addition to providing economic assistance. While emphasizing the fundamental importance of self-help efforts by the Palestinian people, the Committee called for the prompt disbursement of the assistance pledged by the donor countries. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting was conducted in an exceptionally friendly atmosphere and achieved its

original objectives. We also believe that this Committee has been instrumental in enhancing the political momentum generated by the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum and in keeping the peace process on track.

In addition to these efforts at the multilateral and bilateral levels, Japan has been contributing to the peace process by providing assistance to the Palestinian people. Since the Oslo accord of 1993, it has extended aid totalling approximately $500 million. Japan has also been actively contributing personnel to international efforts by, for example, dispatching a contingent of its self-defence forces to participate in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force.

The Middle East peace process is at a critical juncture; the opportunity for genuine progress is perhaps greater now than it has been for many years. The sincere hope of the Japanese Government is that the new momentum will be maintained throughout the difficult final status negotiations, so that a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region can at last be achieved. In concluding, I would like to reiterate Japan's strong commitment and continued support for the Middle East peace process.

Mr. Abu-Nimah (Jordan) (*spoke in Arabic*): The question of the Middle East and the question of Palestine at its core remain important items on this Assembly's agenda. They will remain so until the desired just solution of these questions is achieved and peace prevails throughout the Middle East.

My delegation participates in the discussion of this item this year, recalling with feelings of sorrow and hope the loss to the entire world of a leader who laid the foundations of peace in the Middle East — His Majesty the late King Hussein Bin Talal — and who devoted his life to peace, reconciliation and stability in our region. This great loss has grieved us, yet we also feel hope because the message of peace proclaimed by the late King Hussein will continue to be broadcast by His Majesty King Abdullah II, who, since assuming power, has never once hesitated to follow in the footsteps of his great father towards the reconstruction of the country and the achievement of the lofty goals and objectives in which we believe and for which all the peoples and States of our region yearn. I cannot fail to express my sincere thanks to the friendly delegations who expressed kind words for His late Majesty.

My delegation is pleased by the progress made in recent months in the peace process after the stalemate that hindered it for many years. This progress was enhanced by the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum early last September. Moreover, this positive development was followed by several promising steps, such as the release of a number of Palestinian prisoners, the opening of a safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank and the implementation of a phase of the withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories. Many provisions of the Memorandum remain unimplemented. These steps are important achievements, though modest in view of the slow progress towards peace. The road to peace remains long, tortuous and difficult, despite the passage of nearly eight years since the peace process began in Madrid.

There is a need to reaffirm the role and responsibility of the United Nations vis-à-vis the question of the Middle East and the peace process. It must reactivate its role and reaffirm its responsibility in support of efforts to move the peace process towards its desired objectives. The United Nations, its Charter, its resolutions and their provisions are the principal bases for the solution of disputes and the mainstay of international legitimacy. The peace process is based on the resolutions of the United Nations. Security Council resolution 242 (1967) is the main foundation of the current peace process. That resolution opened the door to peace in 1967. We will be able to achieve the desired peace through its implementation in letter and spirit. Yet this and other resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly remain unimplemented, despite the fact that they were adopted decades ago and have been reaffirmed at each subsequent session of the Assembly.

In this regard, my delegation wishes to emphasize a number of basic principles that we believe constitute sound and solid foundations for the establishment of peace, security, coexistence and cooperation among the peoples and States of our region, without exception. We are compelled to do so particularly because the debate on this item is taking place at a time when the Israeli and Palestinian sides are discussing the most delicate phase of the peace settlement: the final status negotiations.

First, on this day last year and in the course of the discussion of this item before this Assembly, we reaffirmed Jordan's conception of peace as just, lasting and comprehensive. This understanding was shared by most of the international actors directly involved in the question of the Middle East. Our commitment to peace in this context is a strategic one based on our conviction that peace is a basic necessity for all the countries and peoples

of the region. Once achieved, it will be the catalyst of a sea change in the history of the region. It will be a new beginning on a journey towards new horizons of security, stability, peaceful coexistence and a secure, normal life for the countries of the region, of which they have been deprived for almost six decades.

Thus, in 1994, Jordan signed a Treaty of Peace with Israel, based on its belief that such a Treaty would rectify the situation between the two countries, mark a new start in normal, good-neighbourly relations between them and lay the foundation and principles of cooperation between them in all fields. In Jordan, we opened the door to peace without reservation and without shying away from any aspect of fully normalized relations. We did so in the hope that the Israeli-Jordanian peace might set an example to be followed by other neighbouring States of Israel and so that the Jordanian approach might be adopted as a model of commitment to the provisions of the agreement, their implementation in letter and spirit and their translation into a tangible reality. We also wanted our neighbours in Israel to rest assured that, for us, peace is not a document to be signed as an end in itself nor as a cover for stabilizing the causes of conflict and consolidating the gains of war. As we understand it, peace is a reality, a practice, a cooperation and a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect, honouring commitments and implementing them faithfully and responsibly. It was our great hope that this approach would be followed by progress and eventually by an agreement on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks in order to make regional peace comprehensive and to jump-start development and economic reconstruction in the region. We are still awaiting the achievement of this noble objective, now that the main impediments to it have been eliminated.

Secondly, the peace process is based on well-known and solid principles, foremost among which is that of land for peace. This principle was set out in Security Council resolution 242 (1967), which declares the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force and constitutes one of the main foundations and terms of reference of the peace process. How can justice be achieved without a full Israeli withdrawal from all the occupied Arab and Palestinian territories and the return of all lands to their rightful owners? How can the land be returned if settlement-building is pursued and new facts continue to be created on such land? How can we be persuaded that peace is the ultimate objective towards which we all endeavour when official declarations made in Israel reaffirm continued settlement activities in the occupied Arab territories? How can there be confidence in the sincerity of the desire for peace and the achievement of justice when the Israeli occupation authorities persist in demolishing Arab homes, displacing Arabs, expropriating lands, building roads, digging tunnels and creating new facts on the Arab territories that are expected to be returned to the Palestinians?

Settlements built in the occupied territories are illegal and constitute a violation of United Nations resolutions, of human rights, of the Fourth Geneva Convention and of all the bases of the peace process. Ongoing Israeli settlement is one of the main obstacles impeding progress towards peace, and it turns the call for peace into a hollow slogan devoid of meaning and content. Peace cannot be achieved by the continuous deepening of the causes of conflict. Rather, it is achieved by the elimination of these causes. Peace cannot be established by settlement expansion and the denial of the rights of the Palestinian side. Peace can only be achieved by justice. Justice is the basis of peace. Peace is the framework for security.

Thirdly, the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Agreements of 1993 approved the postponement of a number of sensitive and important questions, such as settlements, Jerusalem, refugees and the final status negotiations. It was only natural and imperative that the postponed matters be left unaltered until negotiations have begun. It is inconceivable that this postponement has become an opportunity for Israel to change the facts on the ground in favour of the occupiers and to prejudge the final status negotiations. We had warned earlier that the postponement of negotiations on these important questions, which constitute the core of the conflict, does not mean overlooking them or leaving them without acceptable, just and appropriate solutions. We also warned that leaving any problem without a solution will be a reason for rekindling the conflict. Serious and bold solutions are the ones that address the problems properly, not ones that ignore the rights of the Palestinians in the hope that they will disappear with the passage of time.

We note with a great deal of concern that as the Israeli and the Palestinian sides negotiate the framework of the final settlement, Israel continues to sanction settlement-building and other unilateral actions. This runs totally counter not only to the core of the peace process, but also to the commitments signed and accepted by Israel. It is all the more strange that these positions are taken by the new Israeli Government whose election we welcomed after its moderate, peace-oriented programme enjoyed the support of the Israeli people.

Fourthly, the achievement of comprehensive peace necessitates the resumption of negotiations on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks at the point where they left off, in order to arrive at the desired settlement on the basis of the Madrid frame of reference, the principle of land for peace and Security Council resolutions, particularly resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978). Progress towards peace and the achievement of peace are sure guarantees for checking extremism and violence and for the prevalence of security and safety. There was great hope that negotiations would resume on these two tracks after Mr. Barak's Government took power. We support all efforts aimed at removing the obstacles on those two tracks. It is our hope that we will witness genuine and rapid progress on them.

Fifthly, the question of Jerusalem is one of the main points of the peace process, and a just resolution of it is very important. There is consensus at all legal, international and political levels that East Jerusalem is an integral part of the West Bank occupied in 1967. Therefore, the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention and of relevant Security Council resolutions are applicable to it. The Security Council has attached special importance to the city of Jerusalem since the beginning of the Israeli occupation. It adopted a number of resolutions that reject the annexation of the city and all Israeli legislation and measures aimed at changing the status of the Holy City and other actions aimed at altering its demographic and geographic composition.

Therefore, any measure taken by Israel since its occupation of the city to alter its demographic, political or legal status can only be considered as creation of new facts and a fait accompli to be imposed on the Palestinian side in the final status negotiations. This cannot be accepted. Statements made consistently by some Israeli officials about Jerusalem being the eternal capital of Israel run counter to all the bases of the peace process. The city of Jerusalem is the spiritual capital of the three monotheistic religions and, therefore, it should be an ideal and noble symbol of peace and coexistence. Israeli withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem, the return of those territories to their rightful owners, and the establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Palestine do not mean a new division of the city or the building of walls and fences in the middle it. It means the establishment of justice and the kind of peace that people will welcome, maintain and consolidate.

Sixthly, the Palestinian refugees who were forced to leave their homes in 1947, 1948 and 1967 and those who were deported during the long years of occupation as a result of individual deportation decisions all await a just solution, in accordance with United Nations resolutions, international law, human rights and the rights to personal property, and in particular General Assembly resolution 194 (III). United Nations resolutions have provided for the right of Palestinian refugees to return and to receive compensation for their suffering of years of occupation and for all the material and moral damage they have sustained. The resolution of this question is one of the most important bases of peace and security in the region. We feel that repeated statements by Israeli officials denying the right of the refugees to return are prejudgment of the final status negotiations and therefore impede responsible negotiations and are obstacles to peace.

Seventh, in conclusion my delegation would like to reaffirm its full support for the option of peace and for efforts made by the Palestinian National Authority to establish its national institutions and to continue negotiations with the Israeli side in order to arrive at appropriate and just solutions for the remaining questions and to achieve a just peace between the two sides. My delegation calls upon the Israeli side to move forward with the implementation of the peace agreements and to renounce any actions that will erode confidence in Israel's commitment to the peace that we have repeatedly called for.

The most important thing is to stop settlement activities and to respect the rights of the Palestinian people, in accordance with the Madrid frame of reference and relevant United Nations resolutions, in particular the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, the return of their territories and the establishment of an independent State on their national soil, with Jerusalem as its capital, so that a just and comprehensive peace can be achieved and the region can move towards a more prosperous, peaceful and secure life. We believe that the United Nations, which embodies international legitimacy, must play a vital role in advancing the peace process and in support of the efforts made by the co-sponsors of that process.

We also believe that it is essential for the European Union to continue its efforts in support of those of the co-sponsors of the peace process in order to mobilize all such necessary efforts in all fields for helping the peace process succeed in achieving its objectives. This is important, especially since the European Union members have contributed to peace efforts from the beginning and

continue to contribute to the economic development process as well.

My country looks forward to a wider and deeper international understanding of the economic, financial and developmental needs of the countries and peoples of the region and of the establishment and maintenance of peace in the Middle East. People build and consolidate peace. Yet they do not view it as an abstract concept; rather, they see it through its dividends and results.

Mr. Ka (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): As we have all noted, the peace process in recent years has made significant strides, but, disquietingly, ever since the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements by the Palestine Liberation Organization and the State of Israel in Washington, D.C., in 1993, it has also often just marked time.

The hope that grew out of the Wye River accords dissipated quickly due to lack of sufficient political will on the part of the former Israeli Government. However, it is once again possible to feel hopeful, as Prime Minister Ehud Barak has seen fit to put the peace process back on track. That is why my country, Senegal, encourages the two parties to spare no effort in implementing the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum signed in Cairo on 4 September 1999, as well as all the agreements entered into by the parties concerned. Allow me to avail myself of this opportunity from this rostrum to express the sincere gratitude of my Government to President Hosni Mubarak of the Arab Republic of Egypt, to President Bill Clinton of the United States of America and to Mrs. Madeleine Albright for the very important role they personally played in arriving at that agreement.

It is a matter of the highest priority for the Palestinian Authority and the State of Israel quickly to find common ground on the fundamental issues. It is extremely important, in accordance with the agreed-upon timetable, to come by a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the question of Palestine, which remains the Gordian knot of the crisis in the Middle East. My country, Senegal, faithful to its positions of principle on this thorny set of issues, standing firmly by our brothers, the Palestinian people and their legitimate leaders, will continue, as in the past, to make its modest contribution to resolving the crisis in that part of the world on the basis of the relevant Security Council resolutions — namely, resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), as well as the principle of land for peace.

As regards the Syrian and Lebanese tracks of the peace process, Senegal encourages the State of Israel, the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon to pursue their peace talks. Senegal will continue to support the implementation of Security Council resolutions 497 (1981) and 425 (1978) on the Syrian Golan and Lebanon.

Nonetheless, my country expresses its sincere regrets at the non-implementation of the provisions of General Assembly resolutions 53/37 and 53/38 adopted on 2 December 1998, as to the transfer by certain countries of their diplomatic missions still in Jerusalem, and as to the situation on Syrian territory occupied since 1967.

On the threshold of the third millennium, and on the eve of the celebration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem, the international community as a whole and the United Nations in particular have a historic mission no one else could possibly take on — that of doing their utmost to keep the peace process on track and to support the efforts of all the key figures in the situation in the Middle East to achieve a just and peaceful settlement of the crisis.

Towards that end, my delegation would like to make a solemn appeal to the co-sponsors of the peace process, and to the multilateral protagonists, to redouble their efforts to see to it that the flame of hope, which has just been re-kindled, does not go out.

In conclusion, my delegation welcomes the appointment by the Secretary-General of Mr. Terje Roed-Larsen of Norway as his Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority and as the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. My country, Senegal, will give him the support he will need to succeed in his important and delicate mission. Through Mr. Roed-Larsen, my delegation would like to hail his country, Norway, for its sterling contribution to re-starting the peace process in the region which is the cradle of the three great revealed religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The Middle East region, long deprived of peace, must at last find its way back to its two-fold mission of being a place where people meet and mingle and also that of being a place of historic sites from which messages of peace, each of them unique, go out to the world.

Mr. Kolby (Norway): The situation in the Middle East remains one of the most complex and difficult political issues in the international arena. When we look for reasons for this state of affairs, it will not suffice to study the current situation, but we must also look to the recent and more distant past. However, regardless of the complexity of the issues and their long history, it is vital never to lose sight of the fact that the Israeli and Palestinian peoples share a common future and must solve their common challenges through cooperation and joint action.

Peace and cooperation in the Middle East also continue to be important items on the agenda of the United Nations. The guiding principle that the parties followed when the Oslo accord was signed in 1993 is still valid today. Lasting peace can be established only through negotiations and the development of peaceful relations between the peoples of the region. The basis for negotiations remains Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

It is therefore encouraging that there is new progress in the peace process, The final status talks have begun, and the implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum is more or less following the agreed timetable. Direct contact between both sides is the key to the successful completion of the process.

Great efforts are needed to reach a peace agreement that can guarantee security for all. The time-frames outlined in the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum are ambitious but realistic, provided there is a continued commitment to them by the parties. It is also vital that an agreement be perceived as fair and balanced by the populations on both sides in order to ensure a lasting settlement of the conflict.

A number of decisions of crucial importance will have to be made during the final status negotiations. The question of Jerusalem and the refugee issue will clearly be among the most difficult challenges during the negotiations. My delegation will stress our firm belief that a final status package must include fair and permanent solutions to these issues.

The United Nations should support the peace process in every way possible. The United Nations must encourage the direct dialogue between the parties and, to the extent possible, provide support to them in the implementation of signed agreements. The primary responsibility for creating a favourable atmosphere for peace negotiations, the negotiating process itself and the implementation of agreements reached belongs to the parties themselves. However, although others cannot impose peace agreements in the Middle East, it is our belief that the role of the international community remains crucial. The international community can provide important support and encouragement to the peace process when the parties show the necessary will to move forward.

Norway's belief in the need for the United Nations to provide encouragement to the regional efforts to give new momentum to the peace process was the reason we, in close cooperation with the Russian Federation and the United States, again this year worked on the draft resolution on the Middle East peace process. However, it was not possible to gather the needed support for the draft resolution at this time. Norway's commitment to all aspects of the peace process and its belief in the important supportive role of the international community remains as strong as ever. It is therefore our hope that it will be possible to re-submit the draft resolution if both the co-sponsors and the parties themselves consider it appropriate and useful to again seek this expression of support for the peace process from the international community.

Norway shares the concern of others regarding Israeli settlement activities on the West Bank. We would urge the Israeli Government to stop any further settlement activities that might change the situation on the ground. At the same time, we would call on the Palestinian Authority to intensify its efforts to promote security.

The peace process contains both political and economic elements. The economic development in the Palestinian territories is critical to a lasting peace and will also benefit Israel. In this respect, the recent Palestinian statements on good governance and the rule of law as fundamental factors for economic and social development are to be commended.

Security is of paramount concern for the whole Middle East region, and security issues are vital to all tracks of the peace process. It is therefore important for all of us never to lose sight of the fact that only lasting peace can provide the necessary security in all its political, economic and social aspects.

Mr. Gatilov (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): As we take our leave of the twentieth century, the General Assembly is right to take stock of what has been achieved and to determine what remains to be

undertaken in order to reach a conclusive settlement in the Middle East.

It is perfectly evident that the peace process begun in Madrid in 1991, in spite of the snags and obstacles that have intervened, has moved towards an equitable lasting and comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis. This is eloquent proof that the international community is capable of an active search for appropriate responses to meet great challenges and for ways to tackle pressing regional problems.

Russia views the achievement of a comprehensive settlement for the Middle East as an important component of the efforts to stabilize the situation in the world as a whole.

We note with satisfaction that the peace process is gradually emerging from a period of setback, although the situation is still not devoid of tension. Russia, as a sponsor of the Middle East peace process, considers its chief task to provide continuity to the progress already afoot on some tracks of the peace process and to re-establish the negotiations in other fields, based on the standards and norms of international legality, Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) and the principle of land for peace that stems from those resolutions.

We will continue to put our energies at the service of the task of narrowing the gap between the positions held by the parties and finding solutions for contentious issues.

We are counting on consistent implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh measures agreed for the transition period, in a spirit of mutual partnership and respect for each other's interests and concerns. This will help build confidence and trust between Palestinians and Israelis and will create an atmosphere conducive to spurring on the negotiations on the permanent status of the Palestinian territories.

In our view, the establishment of a Palestinian State will serve as a significant factor for providing lasting peace, stability and security in the Middle East. Russia fully concurs with the Palestinian leadership's choice to pursue this historic goal through negotiation within the framework of the peace process.

We also support an immediate resumption of Israel's talks with Syria and Lebanon to build on the results that have already been achieved, and we believe that true peace and stability in the Middle East will prove impossible without the return of the Golan Heights to the Syrians and the establishment of normal relations between Syria and Israel.

The achievement of this goal is closely associated with the restoration of the territorial integrity of Lebanon on the basis of the full implementation of Security Council resolution 425 (1978). We continue to believe that in the negotiating process, the parties must accept the need to respect each other's interests and understand each other's concerns, including Israel's concerns about its security.

The time has come to re-establish the peace process in full and across the board. On this important issue, Russia will act in full awareness of its responsibilities as co-Chairman of the support group for the multilateral negotiations. We have already declared our readiness to host a meeting of the group in Moscow.

While noting these positive steps, we are nevertheless alarmed to note news of the continued establishment of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem. We call upon the parties to refrain from taking any unilateral measures that could undermine mutual trust and also call on them to be scrupulous in their observance of the obligations they have assumed.

As part of our role as a sponsor of the peace process, we view the economic development of the Palestinian territories as a priority. Many economic goals will be served by implementing the Bethlehem 2000 project, which is aimed at restoring religious and historic sites in Bethlehem and reconstructing and developing the infrastructure. We are ready to work together towards the success of this large-scale undertaking, and we are confident that the celebration of the millennium jubilee will serve to unite all efforts in support of harmony and mutual understanding in the Middle East.

The United Nations has always had an important part to play in the settlement of the question of the Middle East. The convening in New York on 24 September of a conference entitled "Partners in support of peace", in which representatives of the Arab States and Israel participated, gave new impetus to fostering an atmosphere conducive to peace.

We note that the resolutions adopted by the General Assembly on the Middle East are now more politically balanced. This is certainly a clear sign of the positive

developments in Arab-Israeli relations. We therefore consider it important to anchor this positive trend in a special resolution, which would be a clear expression of the desire of the parties to achieve a lasting and equitable peace in the Middle East.

To that end, Russia, the United States and Norway have devoted serious and active efforts as authors of a draft resolution that many have rightly described as the "positive" draft resolution. Unfortunately, we did not succeed in having such a draft resolution adopted. But that failure in no way implies that the idea of a positive resolution has lost its relevance. We hope that the next session will see a different result. The adoption of such a draft resolution would be a contribution to accelerating peace in the Middle East and would enhance the role and authority of the United Nations.

Russia will continue to work actively on the issue of re-establishing the comprehensive character of the peace process, striving to convince both Arabs and Israelis to go the last mile and turn their backs for ever on the negative legacy that has been built up over the years in the history of the Middle East.

The Acting President (*spoke in French*): We have heard the last speaker in the debate under this agenda item for this meeting.

I shall now call on those representatives who wish to speak in exercise of the right of reply.

May I remind members that, in accordance with General Assembly decision 34/401, statements in the exercise of the right of reply are limited to 10 minutes for the first intervention and to five minutes for the second intervention and should be made by delegations from their seats.

Mr. Zaki (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): My delegation has heard the statement made by the representative of Israel this afternoon, in particular his remarks pertaining to relations between our two countries and a specific reference to cooperation between our two ministries of agriculture, which we do not deny. Indeed, relations between Israel and Egypt cover a number of fields. However, what we found rather strange was the reference by the representative of Israel to what he called the Mubarak plan to reclaim desert lands in Egypt. From his statement one gets the impression that cooperation between Israel and Egypt covers that project or that Israel is helping Egypt increase its arable lands.

It is for this reason that I have requested to exercise the right of reply. I would like to point out that any student of history will realize that Egypt was the place where agriculture was born and that many efforts have been made in the course of the last 50 years to expand agriculture beyond the Nile Valley. Allow me also to point out that efforts in agriculture to reclaim desert lands are based on Egyptian know-how, expertise, sweat and labour — a fact that bears repeating and that should not to be misunderstood.

Mr. Shakerian (Islamic Republic of Iran): This afternoon the representative of Israel raised some baseless accusations against my country.

From the very beginning, Israel has been the main source of division and instability in the Middle East — through occupation, intimidation and the widespread and massive violation of the basic human rights of peoples under its occupation, as well as through resorting to State terrorism as a means of expanding its forcible control.

The occupation of southern Lebanon and the rejection of the international community's call to withdraw from the occupied territories are indicative of that regime's policy in the Middle East. The resistance of the Lebanese people and their resolute determination to liberate their homeland from foreign occupation are legitimate rights recognized by international law.

At the same time, it is astonishing that a regime that has a dark record of developing, producing and stockpiling many inhumane kinds of weapons of mass destruction ventures to accuse a country that is among those in the Middle East that have joined the most basic international instruments in effect in the field of disarmament.

Iran is a full party to the instruments that are the main pillars of international disarmament, such as the 1925 Geneva Protocol, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention. Despite numerous calls from the international community, Israel consistently refuses to join these instruments and continues its clandestine programme to develop and produce several kinds of weapons of mass destruction. Israel now remains the only non-party to the NPT in the Middle East. At the same time, its nuclear programme and un-safeguarded facilities continue alarmingly to menace regional and global peace and security.

That regime does not enjoy any better a record in other fields of disarmament, mainly in the biological and chemical areas. There are numerous reports of Israel's clandestine chemical and biological programme. Israel's refusal to join the relevant treaties is another corroborating indication of the existence of these programmes, which heightens the deep concern of the international community about its programmes of weapons of mass destruction and its arsenals.

I would also like to take this opportunity to reject the claim that was raised today by one delegation against the territorial integrity of my country, and to point out that such assertions are unacceptable.

Since our position on the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf is very clear, I need not get into specifics. I would like only to emphasize that the Islamic Republic of Iran has been, and continues to be, prepared to engage with the authorities of the United Arab Emirates.

We remain hopeful that the United Arab Emirates officials will respond positively to our call for bilateral discussions on the basis of the 1971 understandings.

Mr. Samhan (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): This afternoon my colleague, the representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, expressed his support for the position of the United Arab Emirates on the Iranian occupation of the three islands of the United Arab Emirates — Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. It is a simple fact that Iran continues to occupy these Arab islands. We reject the statement just made by the representative of Iran. He is well aware that this question has been brought before the Security Council since the beginning of the occupation by his country of these islands, and that these islands are an integral part of the territorial sovereignty of the United Arab Emirates.

Programme of work

The Acting President (*spoke in French*): I wish to inform Members of some additions to the work programme of the General Assembly.

On Monday, 6 December, in the morning, the General Assembly will first take up, under agenda item 8, the third report of the General Committee contained in document A/54/250/Add.2, and two notes from the Secretary-General, contained in documents A/54/236 and A/54/624.

As the last item for that morning, the Assembly will also take up agenda item 167, entitled "Cooperation between the United Nations and the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization". Under that item, the Assembly will be considering a draft resolution to be issued as document A/54/L.48. Draft resolution A/54/L.5 and the amendments thereto, contained in document A/54/L.10, have been withdrawn.

The meeting rose at 6.15 p.m.